

Colossians Introduction

Colossians 1-4

COLOSSAE INTRO

The book of Colossians is one of 14 written works of Paul the Apostle in our Bible. In some ways, Colossians contains some of the most basic gospel truths that are threaded through all of Paul's letters, but as with each letter, Colossians also has some unique focuses and emphasis on certain aspects of the Christian faith and identity.

Geography:

- **Colossae [image]** was an inland city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). At the time Paul wrote this letter, it was a reasonably small city.
- 6 miles from the larger city of Laodicea and about 12 miles from bustling Hierapolis.
- This is why Paul asks that this letter be read to the church in Laodicea (4:16).

The city of Colossae was about 100 miles inland from the coastal trading hub of Ephesus.

- The apostle Paul did not start this church and had never visited it prior to writing this letter; in fact, the church in Colossae probably never saw Paul's face, but they respected his authority as an apostle of the Lord.
 - A pastor's love for the church extends far beyond knowing each individual. As we'll see, Paul is all about relationships. He loves people, and he loves individuals. But Paul was one man. He couldn't relationally invest in every follower of Christ in every place, but that didn't mean he didn't love them deeply. He loved the church by communicating eternal truth.
- In Acts 19, we discover the circumstances that most likely led to the beginning of the Colossian church. Paul spends a couple of years ministering in Ephesus.

Acts 19:10 - And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.

In this letter, we are introduced to a character named Epaphras. Epaphras was probably the founder and pastor of the church in Colossae. More than likely, he received Christ in Ephesus as Paul preached and reasoned there, and then he was disciplined by Paul. From there, he traveled back to his home city of Colossae, where he preached the gospel and started churches in Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae.

A TROUBLING REPORT

Timing:

- It was most likely written during Paul's imprisonment under Roman guard around 63 AD.

Apparently, Epaphras, the pastor at Colossae, visited Paul in Rome and shared a problem within the church with Paul during this visit. The church was being infiltrated by heresy and false doctrine that was directly attacking the nature of Jesus and the identity of the Christian. Paul testifies at the end of Colossians that Epaphras "labored in prayer" for them to stand firm in the perfect will of God. This pastor was so concerned about the truth of Jesus being preserved in the church that he went to battle on his knees for the saints. From the tone of the text and historical context, we can identify three primary sources of cancer within the church of Colossae:

GNOSTIC HERESY

Gnosticism

The term "Gnosticism" comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." At its core, Gnosticism was a metaphysical belief system claiming that salvation comes through secret, esoteric knowledge—knowledge that supposedly leads to a higher spiritual existence. This knowledge included some of Jesus, but also sought to seek knowledge outside of Christ to become complete. This is why Paul describes Christ as **"the fulness of**

the godhead bodily," and that "you are complete in Him who is the head of all principality and power."

In contrast to early Christianity, Gnosticism attempted to redefine key aspects of faith, such as the nature of God, creation, humanity, and morality. Rather than accepting the biblical view of a good Creator and a fallen creation, Gnostics believed that matter itself was inherently evil, while the spiritual realm was pure. As a result, they rejected the idea that God could take on human flesh. For Gnostics, Jesus was not fully God and fully man, but rather a lesser divine emanation—essentially, a spirit being who came to reveal secret truths that would awaken the "divine spark" supposedly hidden in every human.

This separation of the physical and spiritual had profound implications. Since matter was considered evil and irrelevant to true spiritual life, Gnostics tended to fall into two extremes:

1. **Asceticism** – Extreme denial of the body and physical desires, in an attempt to "purify" the spirit.
2. **Hedonism** – Complete indulgence of physical desires, under the belief that what happens in the body doesn't affect the spirit.

Paul directly confronted these errors in Colossians, emphasizing that in Christ, "all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9), and warning against both legalistic asceticism and licentious living.

Modern-Day Gnostic Influences

Though Gnosticism as a formal system has faded, its core ideas remain alive today in various forms. For example:

- **Mormonism** teaches that humans can ascend to godhood, echoing Gnostic ideas of attaining divine status.
- **Eastern mysticism** emphasizes finding divinity within through meditation and self-enlightenment.
- **Progressive Christianity** often downplays sin and judgment, focusing instead on personal "spiritual discovery" and inner goodness, reminiscent of Gnostic disdain for objective truth and righteousness.

These modern ideologies, like Gnosticism, attempt to elevate subjective experience or hidden insight over the clear revelation of God in Scripture. Paul's message to the Colossians remains just as relevant today: the fullness of truth is found in Christ alone, not in secret knowledge or personal enlightenment.

QUOTE

“When we make Jesus Christ and the Christian revelation only part of a total religious system or philosophy, we cease to give Him the preeminence. When we strive for “spiritual perfection” or “spiritual fullness” by means of formulas, disciplines, or rituals, we go backward instead of forward. Christian believers must beware of mixing their Christian faith with such alluring things as yoga, transcendental meditation, Oriental mysticism, and the like. We must also beware of “deeper life” teachers who offer a system for victory and fullness that bypasses devotion to Jesus Christ. In all things, He must have the preeminence!

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996), The Bible exposition commentary (Vol. 2, p. 104). Victor Books.

JUDAIZERS

In addition, there were those in the Jewish community who acknowledged Jesus but mixed in the Jewish religion with Christ. They brought people back under bondage to the law of Moses, saying that salvation comes not only by faith in Christ but by keeping all of the law.

The book of Galatians largely addresses this group that was troubling the church in Galatia by trying to force the gentile Christians into the Jewish mold, even down to commanding their circumcision as a qualification for salvation! PAUL DESCRIBES WHAT THIS GROUP OF JEWS WAS DOING IN GALATIANS 1:6-7:

[Gal 1:6-7 NKJV] 6 I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, 7 which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

Notice how Paul describes them: They are those who TROUBLE and TWIST.

- They begin by causing people trouble by planting seeds of doubt about Christ's sufficiency. Once someone is troubled and confused, they are there to meet them with twisted doctrine and scripture.
- Start questioning the gospel, start questioning Paul's motive and authority and pretty soon the entire church is thinking that Paul sold them a lemon. Once the troubled

mind is there, all that's needed now is some twisted scriptures to provide the answers.

- I mean, just look at how the covenant of circumcision worked out for Abraham; look at how it set the nation of Israel apart... Look at how God used Moses and the law to separate His people. You want to be part of Abraham's blessing, right? You want to partake in Israel's promises, right? You must be circumcised and keep the laws of Moses!

I like how one theologian describes apostasy:

Apostasy means slowly drifting from the seashore of faith on a raft of doubt, driven by the winds of disappointment and carried by the currents of false teaching. -Todd Wilson

NOTICE: Paul says in verse 7 that though they bring a different gospel, it's not another - In other words, there is no other gospel that God has revealed. God gave the only way of salvation. He established one message for all time and peoples: the message of the gospel of Jesus. Every other message you might hear is not a more profound or new revelation from God; it is merely a perversion of the authentic, genuine article.

- You will get knocks on your door from people who want to tell you about “**Another testament of Jesus Christ.**” [image] I find it interesting that Paul uses the language, “It's really not another...” It's been perverted:

Pervert - A unique word in the NT. It's a verb that means: To twist; To cause a change of state, with emphasis upon the difference in the resulting state...

In other words, Paul is saying that some people want to twist the gospel, changing its emphasis. While some elements remain the same, at its core, the message is entirely opposite from the original intent.

Perverved gospels want to keep the face of Jesus, but change the emphasis and intent of what He came to do:

EXAMPLES:

- The gospel is Jesus + religious works and efforts.
- The gospel is Jesus + adhering to the rules and regulations of a certain church or organization.
- The gospel is Jesus + social justice.
- The gospel is Jesus + environmental activism.
- The gospel is Jesus + conservative or liberal politics.
- The gospel is Jesus + financial success and healthy living.
- The gospel is Jesus + compassionate community service.

No, sorry, but the gospel is salvation from sin and reconciliation to God in Jesus Christ, through God's undeserved grace, received by faith.

- Now, should the gospel truth construct our views on justice, the environment, religion, politics, and practical service? ABSOLUTELY. The gospel both **saves** us and **shapes** us.
- We must be gospel-driven in everything we do, but make no mistake about it: emphasizing any of the former actions over the core need for salvation from sin through the atoning death of Christ is a flat-out perversion of the gospel's intentions.

PAGANISM

Paganism – straight-up godless heathenism from the surrounding society, sexual immorality, live today, die tomorrow type of mentality.

None of us need a lesson on paganism... we are surrounded by people whose only form of worship is fulfilling the natural, sinful desires of their carnal nature!

- But oh, what a temptation worldliness can be for the Christian... especially when you live in a culture that has normalized every form of sin and moral filthiness.

APPLICATION

So, the church had a **triangle of deceptive bombardments**:

- They had mysticism from one side
- They had man-made religiosity from another side
- Finally, they had worldliness from the third corner

In fact, it's not that different from today:

- We live in an age of syncretism, that is, the mixing of various spiritual ideas with Jesus in order to try and form a more complete spirituality of religion that is conducive to the fallen human psyche.

- So, how do we deal with it? The same way Paul did. We must refocus our eyes on Jesus and Jesus alone. That's what Colossians does. It focuses on the centrality and exclusivity of Christ Jesus, His identity and His all-sufficiency for everything we need, and our identity in Christ.

And herein lies the key theme of Colossians. In one word, I would call it "identity." Who is Jesus? Who are you? Does your level of secret spiritual knowledge define you? Does your moral and religious performance define you? Are you deceived into thinking that you can walk in the same sinful patterns you once did, taking advantage of God's grace?

QUESTION

How about you? When you look in the mirror, what, or should I say, WHO do you see?

When we look at our physical appearance, sometimes we see a version of ourselves that is far worse than reality. The blemishes stick out in our minds far more than they will to anyone else. You think, "I can't walk into a room with my hair like this," while everyone else thinks, "Wow, they look great today."

Other times, we choose to see ourselves far better than what is actually there. We think the 5-minute jog we took that morning improved our physique!

The truth is, we can often see ourselves as worse or better than what we really are.

Here's the reality: Many factors affect how we see our identity, not only physically but also emotionally and spiritually.

- Our current circumstances often shape how we see ourselves and interact with the world.
- What others say to us or about us can shift how we see ourselves.
- The state of our relationships, work, and finances can all play a part in trying to form the way we see ourselves.
- **The way we see ourselves is also known as our identity.**

In this world, our identity is often shaped by titles: mom, dad, wife, husband, athlete, artist, musician, intellectual, influencer, etc. Of course, the danger is that every title and identity in this world is temporary. Paul told the Corinthians, "The form of this world is passing away." So what happens when you put all your eggs into the basket of your worldly identity when it ultimately changes or is stripped away? Often, our hope, joy, security, and confidence are

rooted in things that may or may not be there tomorrow. When our identity goes, our hope, joy, trust, and security go with it.

This is why the Colossians emphasize the importance of Christians seeing their full identity in something that cannot shift, break, or disappear with time and change: The hope we have as children of God who have been made new in Christ Jesus. Once my identity is rooted in who I am in Christ, it allows me to have flexibility with the inevitable changes that will take place in this world and in my life. When we recognize that our worth and value are sealed in the acceptance of Christ, that our purpose is eternal, and that God has prepared us for His glory, we can navigate life with faith, hope, and love.

INTRO

In 4 chapters, we have four identity emphases:

The identity of Jesus: Who Christ is - Christ is the source and authority over all physical creation. Likewise, He is the source and authority over the new creation, the church. He is the source and authority over the coming creation, our hope of eternal glory!

Your identity from Jesus: What we need - Just as all creation is held together and complete in Jesus, so we are held together and complete in Jesus. Because of who Jesus is, He becomes all we need. This means that there are many things out there in this world that we DON'T need to know God, ourselves, and our purpose. Contrary to the claim of the gnostics and judiazers, we do not need **worldly philosophy, man-centered religion, or Christless spirituality** to understand ourselves; we need to grow in the knowledge of Christ, His truth, and His will.

Your identity in Jesus: Who you are - Many hindrances we face today in being and doing all God has for us are related to a general lack of understanding of who we are after being transformed by Christ. Colossians teaches us that we literally went from one reality and identity to another in a moment of faith.

Paul declares in at least five instances who you were before Christ and who you are because of Christ:

- **Chapter 1 - We were under the power of darkness, and now you've been transferred into the Kingdom of the Son of His love.**
- **Chapter 1 - We were alienated and enemies of God but have now been reconciled by Jesus' sacrifice.**

- **Chapter 2:13 - We were dead in our trespasses and sin and have now been made alive together with him and forgiven of our trespasses.**
- **Chapters 2-3: We were once subject to the basic principles of the world and religious systems, but now we are raised with Christ to seek things that are above.**
- **Chapter 3 - We once walked in sin according to the dictates and desires of our old nature but now have been given a new nature, renewed in the image of Christ.**

Your identity lived out: What you do - Because of our new identity under Christ's headship, we also have imperatives (commands) to live a life that reflects His nature, not the sinful nature of the fallen and fading world. As we remove the old works of the flesh, we clothe ourselves with Christ's nature by demonstrating love, humility, mercy, and forgiveness toward one another. That practically trickles down to how we treat those who don't know Christ (the world) and those who do know Christ (the church), ultimately changing the tone of our homes (Christ is the lord of our family) and permeating our familial relationships.

The letter is written in an amazing order because it starts with the creation of the universe by and through the eternal God, Jesus Christ, and ends with the statement that Jesus Christ is also the Lord of how you love and treat others as you live out the New Creation.

FINAL EXHORTATIONS

As we move through Colossians over the next several weeks, here are five questions I'd like to present for you to meditate on honestly:

1.) Do I have doubts about who Jesus is that are suffocating my faith?

2.) Have I sought after and embraced ideas and philosophies outside of Jesus to try and discover myself?

3.) Do I see myself through the lens of my past failures and successes or through what Jesus has done for me?

4.) Have I settled for dead religion and human traditions, or am I walking in the life and freedom of Christ?

5.) Does my life practically reflect a transformed identity in Christ, or have I succumbed to cultural norms?

